

Students as Clients:

A Professional Services Model for Business Education

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This is the author's accepted manuscript for:

Armstrong M.J., 2003, "Students as clients: a professional services model for business education", Academy of Management Learning & Education 2 #4, 371-374, doi:10.5465/AMLE.2003.11901964, <http://amle.aom.org/content/2/4/371.abstract>

I enjoyed reading the recent article by Ferris (2002), which pointed out the limitations of the student-as-customer model for guiding the operations of a business school and instead proposed a student-as-junior-partner analogy. This suggestion brought back memories of my own experience as a doctoral candidate, when I felt very much like a "junior partner" as I worked under the guidance of my thesis supervisor. On the other hand, the analogy did not resonate in the same way with my time as an undergraduate and later an MBA student: I don't recall feeling like part of the "firm" or aspiring to join it. Likewise, in my current role as a professor the analogy leaves me feeling more puzzled or hopeless than inspired. When 99% of my "junior partners" leave the university within four years of arrival, does that mean my "firm" has a serious retention problem? How can I possibly provide meaningful mentoring to the 150+ students passing through my classrooms each year?

My purpose in this article is to describe a professional services *student-as-client* model that I believe offers a more realistic guide for core business school operations than either the customer model or the partner model. I begin in the next section by noting the situations where the partner model is well suited, and show why I don't believe it is

realistic for most programs. I then define the client analogy, illustrate how it offers a better fit, and describe some of the insights that it suggests.

PARTNERSHIP IS A GREAT MODEL - SOMETIMES

I agree that the partner model is a useful one for doctoral programs where the contingencies described by Ferris (2002: 191-192) are met: class sizes are small, students' educational maturity is high, and student-faculty interaction can be quite extensive.

These thesis-oriented students also resemble a firm's junior partners in practical ways:

- (a) They contribute to the organization's outputs (teaching and research) through their employment as teaching assistants, lecturers, research assistants, and via their theses;
- (b) They have an interest in the roles of the faculty (the "senior partners") and tentatively aspire to similar roles in the future (albeit at other institutions);
- (c) Their interaction with thesis supervisors clearly involves a mentoring relationship.

"This behavior is very common in doctoral programs..." (Ferris 2002: 189).

To my mind however the partner analogy is not nearly as satisfying in the context of undergraduate and MBA programs which rarely satisfy the model's contingencies: class sizes are larger, the educational maturity of the students is lower, and the interaction between students and professors is limited. As well, these students can behave quite unlike junior partners in a firm:

- (a) They are primarily *consumers* of education services (rather than producers) and a source of revenue for the organization (rather than paid help);
- (b) They work hard to successfully *leave* academia and become managers in the outside business world, rather than working hard to stay on as professors;

(c) Their educational activities only rarely resemble mentoring. I consider myself to be doing well if I learn just the names of all my undergraduate students.

Of course the partner model will fit some of these students well, such as senior MBA students doing independent study projects. Unfortunately these are exceptions rather than the norm, and we are setting ourselves up for failure if we try to use the partner model as the primary standard for assessing most programs. But since the customer model also has severe limitations, this implies that a third alternative is needed.

THE STUDENT-AS-CLIENT MODEL

What I suggest as an improved analogy is to think of the university as being like a *professional* firm and the students as *clients* who pay to receive *professional services* from that firm. It is natural to see business faculty as being members of a *profession*; that is, "A calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation.... and committing its members to continued study and to a kind of work which has for its prime purpose the rendering of a public service" (Webster's, 1986: 1811).

Although *customer* and *client* are used interchangeably in casual conversation, in this context I make use of a subtle distinction between them. A purchaser of mundane products is acting as a customer, i.e. "One that purchases some commodity or service" (Webster's, 1986: 559), whereas a client is "A person who engages the professional advice or services of another", or in an older meaning, "A person under the protection of another" (Webster's, 1986: 422). The key difference is that customers rely on their own judgment to evaluate a purchase, whereas clients must rely on the professionals to tell them what they need. Thus I feel competent to choose which groceries to put into my shopping basket, but I rely on my lawyer to tell me the best clauses to put into a contract.

In the following paragraphs I mostly follow the format of Ferris (2002) to describe why I think the client analogy provides a superior fit for most undergraduate and MBA programs. A summary of the main points is shown in Table 1; note that although it is similar to that of Ferris, I have added an eighth component and altered the wording of several others to better distinguish the client, customer, and partner models.

1. Although they bring revenue to the firm, clients are not "king" because they lack the professional's expertise; that is, professionals have *expert power* (see e.g. McShane 2001: 360). An engineer may tell me that a concrete foundation must be 12 inches thick. I am free to ask the engineer to explain the decision, or go to another engineer for a second opinion, but realistically I have to accept the professional's judgment if I want to proceed. Business students likewise rely on the professional judgment of faculty in preparing for their future careers. They may initially "suffer" through a required course in statistics because we tell them they will need that knowledge later to make intelligent use of marketing forecasts.

2. Clients are always "right" about their "symptoms" or *wants*, but may be quite wrong about their underlying *needs*; professionals often provide feedback to correct clients, and clients must follow the professional's guidance if they want to benefit from the service. Thus I am always "right" when I tell my dentists that I would prefer to have zero cavities without ever brushing my teeth, but they always point out the need to brush regularly. University students may prefer to have perfect grades or a faster way to complete their essays; professors nonetheless correct their errors on assignments and provide some checks on plagiarism.

3. Clients get no guarantees as to service *outcomes* but are entitled to service at a "reasonable professional standard" (Cheeseman, 1998: 85). When my lawyers draft a contract for me, they never guarantee that it will withstand any possible lawsuit. The only assurance I have is that "In advising his client, the attorney is bound to exercise reasonable care and diligence..." (Weinstein 1998: 67-68). Even if I suspect the lawyer is negligent my route of appeal is to the lawyer's professional association, i.e. the lawyer's professional peers. Similarly, universities do not guarantee that graduates will find high-paying jobs, nor do professors guarantee that reading the entire textbook will result in a grade of "A". The business school owes the students at least a reasonable (and hopefully excellent!) education, but this "reasonableness" is determined by faculty judgment; a student may ask to have their term paper remarked, but this "second opinion" will be provided by another professor.

4. While clients may be free to treat professionals poorly, in practice they tend to be polite and heed norms of civil conduct, as "...the client must deal with the attorney in a fair and reasonable manner" (Weinstein 1998). After all, the client is depending on the professional: do I really want to annoy the physician who is about to prescribe a powerful medication for me? Students may complain about the amount of work involved in my course, but they are generally civil in tone; undergraduates in particular address me with a deferential "Professor" even while telling me that the test I just gave them was completely unreasonable, if only because they know I am the one who assigns the mark.

5. Clients may seek whatever professional service they feel they need and can afford, but a professional may decline them due to being too busy, not finding their case "interesting" enough, or because the client would not benefit from their services. I could

offer engineers a large sum of money to design a bridge for me, but if the features I wanted were not structurally sound the engineers would likely refuse because such an act would contravene their professional code of ethics. At a university, students are admitted based upon their qualifications (previous grades, GMAT test scores) and needs (stated career goals). Even if a school has spaces left it might refuse admission to students with weak qualifications because of the elevated risk posed to the students (of failing) and to the school (of reduced reputation).

6. Clients have many wants but may have to subordinate some of them in order to satisfy their primary need; they certainly are not concerned with satisfying the firm's goals. I am not interested in whether the construction of my building will make an engineering firm famous; I am interested in the trade-off between aesthetic appeal and low construction cost, as it may be structurally impossible to have both. Students do not attend university in order to advance its research agenda; they attend to satisfy their own needs. Economic and intellectual realities may require them to make choices amongst these needs, as between a demanding but rewarding honors program versus an easier general studies degree.

7. The "client" who provides revenues to the firm is sometimes a composite of several individuals (called *relative influences*, see e.g. Hawkins, Best & Coney 2001: 206) each with their own priorities. When I visit my dentist for a check-up, I am the obvious client; most of the cost however will be covered by my health insurance company, who therefore is also a client of sorts for the dentist. The university receives tuition revenue paid not only by the students themselves, but also on their behalf by parents, employers, or scholarship agencies. Governments similarly provide funding

support that is related to the students (e.g. the annual support grants for my public university are influenced by enrollment figures). Universities need to understand these different revenue sources and their demands (for e.g. auditable financial records) but still keep their primary focus on the needs of students.

8. Clients come to professionals to benefit from their specialized services; once this is done they leave. I visit my lawyers' office to receive their legal advice before returning to my regular routine; I do not go there to join the firm or to become a lawyer. Students attend university for a few years to receive an education before moving on in life; few intend to become professors, so undergraduate programs are structured accordingly.

MODEL INSIGHTS

The real value for any analogy is in the insights it suggests; below I describe three of these for the client model.

Market orientation. Like the customer model, the client model suggests we look outward to view prospective students as market segments to be served by our programs. But here in the client model we focus on the students' underlying *needs* (employability and intellectual development) that our professional services can uniquely satisfy, not the superficial *wants* (light workload and no risk of failure) that may also be expressed. In contrast, the partner model would imply a more inward-looking human resources management approach that might fit doctoral students but not undergraduates.

Professional judgment. To properly serve their markets, business schools must be able to tell clients that certain issues are matters of professional judgment that they may not immediately appreciate. If students complain that a required course in statistics is difficult, the primary response should not be to remove it from the curriculum (a

reasonable solution under the customer model) but rather to explain how it provides a necessary step towards the personal goals of the *students* ("If you want to become an auditor, you need to learn about sampling"). The partner model on the other hand would imply justifying the course by reference to the organizational goals of the *university* ("Our professors use statistics in their research, and they are good at teaching it"). Note that where professional judgment is not involved it should not be invoked as a convenient excuse. If students complain that the computer labs are too crowded, those complaints should be addressed as in other retail services: provide the level of service that the market is willing to pay for.

Course evaluations. The appropriate role for end-of-semester course evaluations by students becomes clearer when we compare such feedback to legal clients completing hypothetical survey forms just before leaving the law office. Such surveys could provide reasonable *estimates* of *basic* service issues such as the comfort level of the waiting room or the clarity of a lawyer's explanation of a contract. Conversely those feedback forms would be largely incapable of addressing the primary issue of *how well the professional service satisfied the client's underlying needs* (Question: "Did you get good legal advice?" Answer: "I don't know, we haven't been sued yet, ask me in a few years..."). Thus the client model implies that while end-of-course evaluations should continue, their usefulness is necessarily limited to relatively minor topics ("Were the instructor's slides clearly legible? Was the room big enough to seat everyone?"). This analogy also emphasizes the need for more follow-up studies of graduates *after* they leave the school (see e.g. Boyatzis, Stubbs & Taylor, 2002) so as to capture more meaningful measures of service effectiveness.

COMBINING THE MODELS: A FEW PARTNERS, MANY CLIENTS

I believe that for the undergraduate and MBA programs at the core of a business school's teaching activities, the client model I have advocated here provides a much more useful analogy than either the partner model or the customer model. On the other hand, the partner model is well suited to exceptional programs like the PhD. Thus I would like to conclude by proposing a natural combination of these two models: that we view the business school (firm) as a professional organization whose doctoral students (junior partners) develop as they assist the faculty (senior partners) in delivering teaching (professional services) to the university's undergraduate and MBA students (clients). This combined model gives us guideposts for all of a business school's teaching activities while highlighting the fact that there are fundamental differences in student needs between programs that should be addressed by corresponding differences in program designs, operational decisions, and performance metrics.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I thank the editor and the reviewer for their helpful suggestions for improving this article. I would also like to acknowledge the financial support provided by a Discovery Grant from Canada's Natural Sciences & Engineering Research Council (NSERC).

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TABLE 1

Customers, Clients, and Junior Partners.

Customers	Clients	Junior Partners
1. Are king.	Have financial but not expert power.	Do as senior partners say.
2. Are always right.	May be wrong and receive feedback.	May be wrong and receive feedback.
3. Insist on guarantees.	Expect competency.	Get no guarantees.
4. Can mistreat sales reps.	Typically heed norms.	Are required to heed norms.
5. Can buy whatever they can afford.	Must be accepted by professionals and follow advice.	Must be accepted by senior partners and follow orders.
6. Have their wants indulged.	Have their underlying needs served.	Help firm achieve its goals.
7. Provide revenue, perhaps via benefactors.	Provide revenue, perhaps via benefactors.	Are paid to serve clients who in return provide revenue.
8. Consume services and leave once satisfied.	Consume services and leave once satisfied.	Provide services and hope to stay with the firm.